

Friday, 9 December 2002, 21:22 GMT



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Monday, 9 December, 2002, 21:22 GMT

Saudi opposition gets radio voice



Dissenting voices have been silenced before now

By Magdi Abdelhadi
BBC News

A new radio station run by a Saudi opposition group has gone on air in Europe.

The group behind the service said Radio Al-Islah was a 24-hour satellite service but was also available on short-wave radio and can be heard in the Middle East as well as Europe.

The Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia said Saudi citizens can now for the first time criticise the Saudi regime publicly with total impunity because of modern technology.

Radio stations run by opposition groups are a rare occurrence in the Arab world, and the launch marks a dramatic breakthrough in a region where public broadcasting is tightly regulated by governments.



New technology allows opposition voices to be heard, reformists say

The new satellite station Sawt Al-Islah - which means Voice of Reform - is using the latest internet technology to help disgruntled Saudis voice their criticism of the royal family.

Talk shows

A spokesman for the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia told the BBC that by using an internet phone service - known as Paltalk - listeners can take part in the programme and say what they like without risking arrest or harassment.

Saad al-Fagih said the bulk of the station's schedule was talk shows.

The topics discussed, he said, included lack of transparency in the Saudi system, corruption, poverty and failure to implement Islamic law.

Saudi authorities had in the past succeeded in foiling previous attempts to launch opposition broadcasts from exiles in the West using their financial clout.

Mr Fagih said as Radio Al-Islah operated out of a European country, the Saudis could not put the pressure on. He declined to disclose which country was the base.

Royal connections

There are few opposition stations in the Arab world, where all radio and television channels are either owned by the state or companies associated with the ruling elites.

There are several Saudi satellite television channels based abroad, but most of them are either owned by members of the royal family or companies close to them.

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Radio Al-Islah began broadcasting last week.

If it survives any future attempts by Saudi authorities to silence it, the emergence of modern technology will have proved a decisive factor in the struggle between freedom of expression and censorship.

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